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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes a study conducted by Educational Testing Service and RMC Research Corporation, of compensatory reading programs sponsored by Title I as well as those supported solely by state and local funds. The results show that in schools which received compensatory funds, the students most in need of it received additional help in overcoming their reading problems. Students who received this extra assistance tended not to fall further behind their peers in reading skills, in their liking for reading, and in their feelings about themselves as readers. On some of the reading tests used, compensatory students tended to catch up slightly. These results can be contrasted with those from earlier studies which showed that disadvantaged students without compensatory assistance fell progressively further behind in reading skills and attitudes. A limited number of unusually effective programs were identified which had in common a set of planning and management activities. (Author/AA)

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Executive Summary Planning/Evaluation Study.
U.S. Office of Education/Office of Planning, Budgeting and Evaluation

A STUDY OF COMPENSATORY READING PROGRAMS

SEPTEMBER, 1976

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The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 initiated Federal aid to education on a large scale. Title I of this act provided additional funds to school districts so that they could assist their most educationally needy children in those schools with the highest concentration of economically disadvantaged students. During the past decade appropriations for this title have about doubled from its initial level of nearly one billion dollars. These funds have supplemented the total expenditures for all elementary and secondary education by approximately three to four percent each year with about forty percent of these sums being used to support basic skills programs, primarily in the elementary grades. Prior to the inception of Title I only a few States had their own compensatory programs. However, since that time nineteen have initiated their own, of which many are modeled after the Federal program. Early evaluative studies of Title I were inconclusive due in part to the infancy and diffuseness of the program (not focused on basic skills and not serving the most needy students) and due also to the lack of availability of adequate evaluative data. With the advent of funds to conduct more thorough program evaluations, the Office of Planning, Budgeting and Evaluation of the U.S. Office of Education initiated a large scale study of compensatory reading programs sponsored by Title I.* However, since there was an interest in gauging the performance of a variety of programs

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* The study was conducted by the Educational Testing Service and RMC Research Corporation.

and in finding successful ones regardless of their sponsorship, compensatory reading programs supported solely by State and local funds were also included. The study had three major objectives:

- To obtain a detailed description of compensatory reading practices throughout the nation in grades 2, 4 and 6;
- To determine how such practices relate to student reading improvement;
- To obtain a detailed description of those practices that were found to be associated with unusual effectiveness.

To accomplish these objectives the study was designed to be carried out in phases. The first phase involved a questionnaire survey of a nationally representative sample of 731 U.S. public elementary schools to obtain information on their regular and compensatory reading practices. The second phase involved Fall and Spring testing of all students in grades 2, 4 and 6 of a subsample of 232 of the original group of schools. An additional set of 34 schools with noteworthy (unusual) reading programs nominated by subject matter experts were also included to ensure the representation of diverse instructional approaches.* A third phase of the study examined summer programs in a subsample of 27 schools from the second phase. A fourth phase of the study entailed a series of visits by teams of observers to a selected group of schools that displayed a range of effectiveness to verify ongoing practices, ascertain reasons for program effectiveness and obtain detailed information on those found to be unusually effective.

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* The second phase was carried out during the 1972-73 school year.

The study found* that:

1. In schools that offer compensatory assistance in reading the most educationally needy students, as indexed by their depressed reading test scores, are the ones who receive compensatory assistance, with students in Title I supported projects being more needy than students in compensatory reading projects funded from other sources.

2. The level of services that students receive by virtue of their participation in compensatory projects (both Title I and non-Title I) is greater than that received by non-participants, with the extent of such services depending upon the setting in which students receive their reading instruction. Students in small reading groups (7 to 12 students) received more services than did compensatory students in larger instructional groups (26 to 27 students), and they in turn received more services than did compensatory students in a mixed classroom setting, i.e. one that also contained non-compensatory students. Schools with Title I-funded programs served more of their students in small reading groups than did schools with compensatory funds from other sources (6% versus 2%). Title I-funded schools provided a slightly greater level of services to their compensatory students than did non-Title I schools with compensatory programs. However, non-Title I schools with compensatory projects provided somewhat more services for their compensatory students relative to their own non-compensatory students than did Title I schools.

3. Students who received compensatory assistance in reading tended not to fall behind their less needy, unassisted peers in their reading skill performance during the school year. For some of the achievement tests,

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* For the more detailed findings the reader is referred to the Technical Summary.

compensatory students were closer to non-compensatory students in their reading skill performance in the Spring than in the Fall. Students in Title I-funded projects started out further behind the average student than did students in compensatory projects funded from other sources, and gained slightly less than the non-Title I compensatory students. Further, compensatory assisted students tended to become favorable towards themselves as readers and toward their reading activities to a degree that was equal to or greater than that of their less needy, unassisted peers. These latter results were much the same for Title I as for non-Title I compensatory students. Such results can be contrasted with those from earlier studies, which showed that disadvantaged students fall progressively further behind in their reading performance and become increasingly more fatalistic about their ability to improve their life circumstances through education.*

4. Five compensatory programs were identified as being unusually effective in terms of the reading improvement of their students during the school year and independently by the judgment of trained observers. Four of them were funded by Title I. The fifth originated, in part, from Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

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* Pre-Title I evidence for this decline comes from the Educational Opportunities Survey of 1965 while more recent evidence comes from evaluations of the Emergency School Aid Act (test performance of minority isolated students) and the Follow Through program (test performance of non-Follow Through students). See the Technical Summary for these references.

All of the programs appeared to share a number of common elements concerned with what one might term a set of "planning and management variables". The elements were: (1) all had defined reading as an important instructional goal, had assigned it priority among the school's activities and had manifested this committment by expending more time on reading or on having a better quality of reading resources; (2) in all five there was a key person who provided guidance and direction in reading (in three of the five it was the principal); (3) there was careful attention to basic skills (including reading); (4) there was a relative breadth of materials; and, (5) there was evidence of interchange of ideas among staff members.

In summary, the results from this study have shown that in schools that offer compensatory reading programs the most educationally needy students (as indexed by their depressed reading test scores) are receiving special assistance in reading, and this assistance is in addition to the level of services provided to non-compensatory students. Overall, recipients of this special assistance in reading tend not to fall further behind their more advantaged, unassisted peers as would be expected based on historical data. Further, for some of the tests, compensatory and non-compensatory students were closer together in their reading skill performance in the Spring than in the Fall. Schools that received Title I funds had greater concentrations of educationally and economically disadvantaged students than did schools that received funds from other sources. Title I schools tended to provide compensatory assistance to greater proportions of their students than did non-Title I schools and those students served were more needy (viz. they had lower test scores).

Both categories of schools (Title I and non-Title I) provided somewhat similar levels of supplementary resources, and Title I schools manifested slightly less improvement with their compensatory students than did non-Title I schools--a result which might be accounted for by the fact that Title I students had lower scores to begin with. However, most of the unusually effective compensatory programs were Title I funded. Finally, the extent to which gains made in one school year are sustained in subsequent years is not currently known but is the subject of a current study.

Some of the general implications of these results are noteworthy. First, the highly negative conclusions which have characterized many recent studies and discussions on compensatory education--generally to the effect that schooling per se has little effect and that compensatory education in particular is an ineffective means for redressing the educational deficits of the disadvantaged--are not supported by the data from this evaluation. Rather, data from this study seem to indicate that Title I and other similar compensatory education programs have at least reached the point where they are retarding or preventing the relative decline in achievement among disadvantaged children that would almost certainly occur in the absence of such programs. (Other recent studies supported by the Education Division have reached similar conclusions).

Further, the data from the present study seem to indicate that in some outstanding cases fairly dramatic achievement gains beyond the "prevention of decline" level have been achieved.

However, despite these moderately positive findings, the data from this study make it very clear that current compensatory education programs are no panacea. The task of narrowing the substantial achievement gap between the disadvantaged children of our society and their more advantaged peers remains a major piece of unfinished business.

The data from this and other current studies, however, suggest that compensatory education programs carried out as part of the schooling process do offer promise in improving the educational deficits of disadvantaged students and that such efforts should be continued in the future. The data further suggest that through the identification and dissemination of exemplary projects and through continued research into the development of other effective models and curricula, Title I and similar programs can be made even more effective.